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ABSTRACT

In the 1991-92 school year, the Ontario (Canada) Ministry of Education conducted a province-wide writing review of Grade 12 students. The purpose was to provide public accountability at the school board and provincial levels, by gathering information on school program implementation and student achievement in English. Results of this survey, however, should not be interpreted out of context, especially with regard to Toronto's students. The composition of students at Toronto (Ontario) schools should be considered if the test results are to be accurately understood because in that area the proportion of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students is proportionately higher. A breakdown of the overall results by students' response to the ESL enrollment question, which may be a more useful way of presenting the data, indicates that the performance of non-ESL students was somewhat parallel to that of the province. The breakdown does, however, reveal that Toronto's ESL students lagged behind the provincial results for ESL students. One possible reason for the gap is the different background of Toronto's ESL students from those of other jurisdictions. Unfortunately, the 1991-92 Review did not have information on ESL students' background to allow analysis of its relationship to performance. Other performance factors appeared to be gender, time spent working, and the level of difficulty of previous English courses taken. Review data revealed that more time could be spent in writing across the curriculum and using computers in writing. (Includes two tables and nine figures of data.) (TB)

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Provincial Grade 12 Writing Review: A Closer Look at Toronto's Performance

June 1994

Maria Yau

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the 1991 Grade 12 Provincial Writing Review results were released, much public emphasis was placed on the writing results either at the board or school-by-school level. However, a closer examination of the Review data indicates that there were other aspects of the results that were equally important for practitioners, policy-makers and the public in order to understand and improve students' writing performance. The following highlights some of the major findings based on a further analysis of Toronto School Board data extracted from the Review database and pertinent Ministry reports.

- While the overall writing results of the Toronto Board were lower than those of the province, one should not lose sight of the fact that in Toronto the proportion of ESL students participating in the review was at least three times that of the province at the Advanced Level (at least four times at the General Level, and five times at the Basic Level). A breakdown of the results indeed shows that the performance of Toronto's non-ESL students was similar to that of the province's. It is thus misleading to look at or compare the writing results without considering the context from which the results were derived.

- It is equally misleading to compare the ESL students' performance of one jurisdiction with that of the others as if ESL students are a homogenous group. The English proficiency level of ESL students varies considerably according to such factors as recency of arrival in Canada, their prior exposure to English, and their former schooling. Our latest Every Secondary School Student Survey, which was conducted in the same year as the Grade 12 Provincial Review, shows that a large proportion of our ESL students were recent arrivals with minimal prior exposure to English and formal schooling. These students need more time and efforts to acquire their proficiency as compared to those ESL students who have been in the country for a longer period of time or who have English as part of the curriculum in their home countries. Without more information on the background of ESL students in different jurisdictions, comparisons may be misleading.

- The Review shows that while for most students, parents/guardians and teachers were both considered as an important source of support for improving their writing, ESL students relied more on their school and teachers in developing their writing skills, particularly in such areas as grammar and "aspects of writing".

- Aside from the ESL factor, other factors that seemed to bear some relationship to the writing results were gender, time spent on part-time work, and the level of difficulty of previous English courses taken. Female students were more likely to write better, and to have enjoyed writing than their male counterparts. Students who worked for limited hours per week outperformed those who worked for more hours or those who did not hold a part-time job at all. And students who had switched between General and Advanced Level English courses previously did not fare as well as those who had always taken Advanced Level English.

- With regard to the intended curriculum versus the implemented curriculum, the Review data reveal that more could be done in the areas of writing across the curriculum, and the use of computers in writing. In terms of teaching and evalution of writing, both students and teachers seemed to agree on the helpfulness and importance of many methods and practices used in the classroom. But there were a few areas which students found helpful and would probably like to see more from their teachers; these included teaching "aspects of writing"; instruction in grammar; having separate marks for each aspect of the writing; and having numerical and letter marks for evaluation of their writing.

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Background

In the school year of 1991-92, the then Ontario Ministry of Education conducted a province-wide writing review of Grade 12 students. The purpose was to provide public accountability at the school board and provincial levels, by gathering information on school program implementation and student achievement in Grade 12 English writing. The Provincial Review consisted of two main components:

1. surveys of school principals/department heads, teachers and students on various writing issues, such as writing attitudes, practices and environment, both in and out of school;

2. student writing achievement based on the results of an assigned writing task and a self-selected "best piece" done for their English course during the school year.

The Toronto Board of Education had all its secondary schools, including night schools, participate in the review, with the following groups and numbers of participants.

Table 1: Groups and numbers of Toronto Board's participants in the Provincial Review

Participants		Number
Principals/Department Heads		26
Teachers		125
Students	Advanced English	approx. 2600 (84% were day-school)
	General English	approx. 900 (78% were day-school)
	Basic English	approx. 60 (100% were day-school)

In December 1993, the Ministry released the Provincial Review results in several forms, one of which was a technical report entitled Provincial Review of Writing in Grade 12 English: Technical Report, 1991-92. As well, the Ministry sent to each school board its board results along with individual school reports for participant schools. All these reports summarize the survey findings and the students' writing results, as well as the actual responses of the participants to each of the questionnaire items.

Since the Toronto Board, along with 60 other school boards in Ontario, chose to conduct its own local review using the Provincial Review instruments, the Board was required "to interpret the results and to release a public report." (Ministry's Technical Report, p.1) In January 1994, the Curriculum Division of our Board presented its preliminary report with highlights of the review results for its day and night schools. The preliminary report also outlined the process for developing a Board Action Plan in response to the results presented.

As part of the process, Research Services was requested to conduct "a detailed analysis of the results of the Writing Review" in order to identify issues and areas that needed to be addressed in the Action Plan. Since the preliminary report prepared by the Curriculum Division has already highlighted the *overall* findings presented in the Toronto Board report issued by the Ministry, this research will take a *more detailed* look at the results of the Review by analyzing both the printed data contained in the Board report and the students' raw data (in computer ASCII files) obtained from the Ministry. In addition, the recent Every Secondary School Student Survey conducted by the Toronto Board in the same year as the Grade 12 Writing Review will be used as a supplementary source of information for analysis.

Understanding Toronto's results in context

Figure 1 shows the percentage of Toronto's day-school students who took Grade 12 Advanced Level English course (ENG4A)[1] and attained the "acceptable level" (Levels 4-6) [2] of writing in their assigned task and best piece, compared with that of the province as a whole.

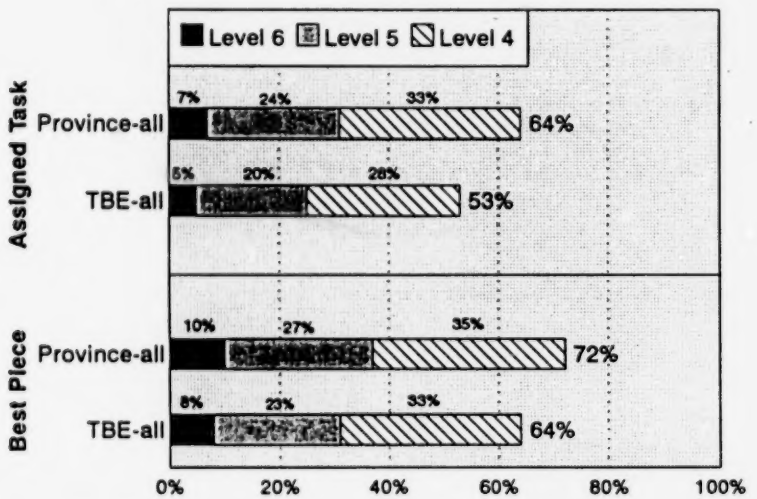

Figure 1: Overall writing results for Toronto and the province

1. For this report, only day-school students who took the Advanced Level English course were analysed. These students made up about 70% of the total number of student participants.

2. These standards, which were set by the Provincial Interpretation Panel and the Toronto Board Interpretation Panel, were expected of the majority (75-80%) of the students who took Advanced Level English courses. For details, see "Standard Setting" of the full report.

While the overall results for Toronto's students were below those of the province, one should not interpret this outcome without taking into consideration other relevant factors, such as the composition of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Since this particular review focused on students' English language skills - specifically writing, students' own language background should at least be one of the contextual factors to be considered. The Provincial Review Student Questionnaire had a question that addresses this factor. The question was: "Have you ever been enrolled or are you currently enrolled in an English as a Second Language course or program coded ESL?" Twenty-eight percent of the ENG4A students reported "yes" - a much larger proportion than for the province (9%). The ratio was even higher for students who took the General or the Basic Level English courses. (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Proportion of ESL students by level of English course difficulty (day-school only)

% of self- identified ESL	Grade 12 English Course		
	Advanced	General	Basic
In Toronto	28%	38%	30%
In Ontario	9%	9%	6%

As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of those who attained at or above the "acceptable" level in their writing tasks was higher among the non-ESL students[3] (61%) than among their ESL counterparts (35%).

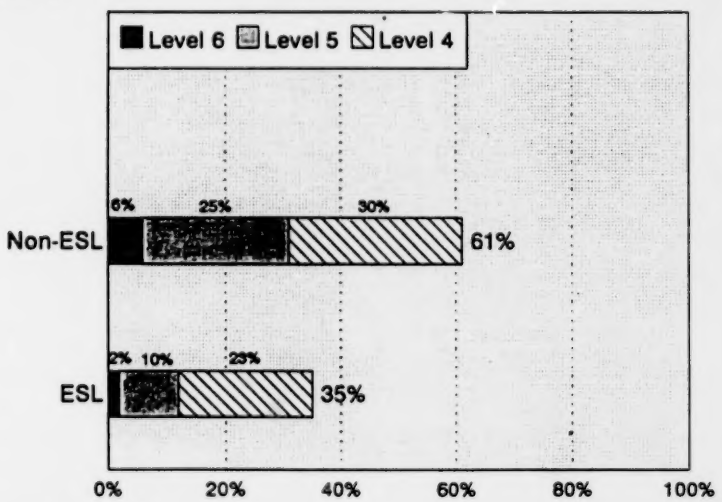

Figure 2: W.iting results (assigned task) by students' language background

3. It should be noted that in this report the identification of ESL versus non-ESL students was based on how students responded to the question on enrolment in ESL program. It is possible that some ESL students might report "no" according to the way the question was asked. But since there is no way of verifying this, and for convenience sake, those who answered "no" to the question are classified as "non-ESL".

Further analyses indeed indicate a strong inverse (negative) relationship between the proportion of ESL students in schools and the writing results for the schools. Figure 3 demonstrates that schools with a higher proportion of (self-identified) ESL students tended to have a lower percentage of their students performing at or above the acceptable level. The slope illustrates an inverse relationship. A Spearman Correlation Analysis also yields a high *R* of -0.74 for the assigned writing task at the significant level of < 0.0005.

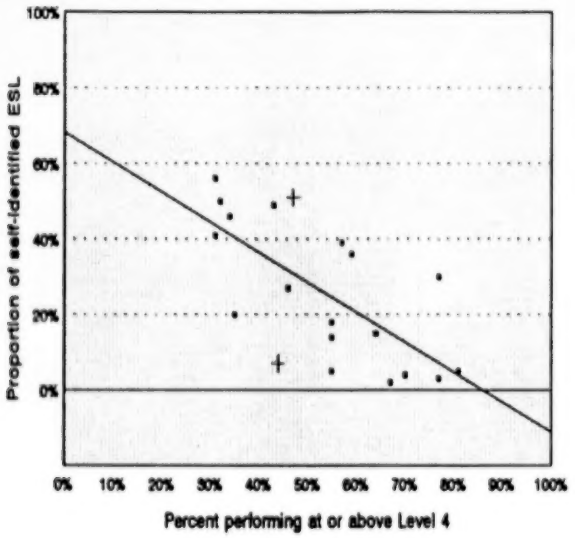

Figure 3: Individual school results (assigned task) in relation to the proportion of ESL students

As discussed in a recent letter of the ESL/ESD Resource Group of Ontario (ERGO) to the Ministry (May 1994)[4], these findings illustrate that:

> Reporting the results of all learners as if they were one homogeneous group is misleading. On the one hand, the results for students who have been involved in the Ontario education system through the elementary and middle grades will be depressed by the low performance of those who are still acquiring English as a second language. On the other hand, the performance levels of the ESL learners will be masked in the general results.

Figure 4 is a breakdown of the results by students' language background. With such a breakdown, it is evident that the performance of Toronto's non-ESL students, especially those who achieved at Levels 5 and 6, was quite parallel to the provincial norm, though there were still 39% of the non-ESL students who performed below the acceptable level.

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4. The letter was a request to the Ministry to include ESL/ESD students in the upcoming Grade 9 literacy test, as well as to include the collection of data that reflect the background characteristics, such as age and length of residence, of the ESL participants in order to provide more useful aggregate data on students' performance.

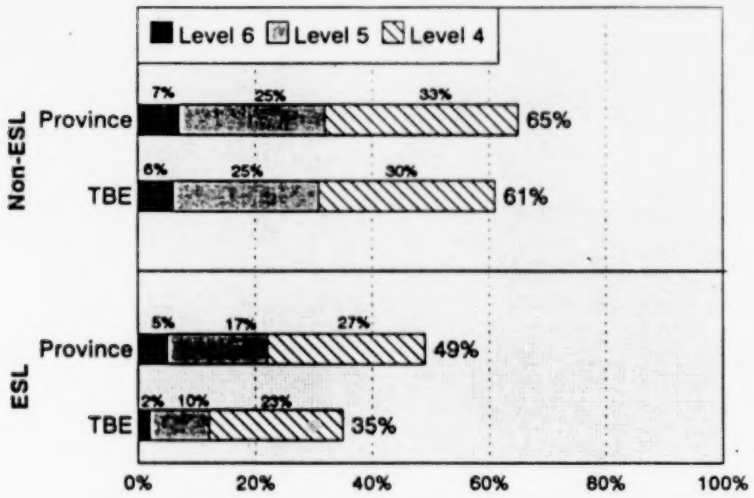

Figure 4: Writing results (assigned task) by students' language background - Toronto versus the province

The breakdown does, however, show that Toronto's ESL students lagged behind ESL students of the province as a whole. This discrepancy is even more significant when one bears in mind that the proportion of ESL students in Toronto was much larger than that of the province. (See Table 2.) The ESL students' writing performance will now be examined in greater detail.

ESL students and writing outcomes

As noted above in Figure 4, there was a performance gap between ESL students in Toronto and those from the province as a whole (35% from the Toronto Board versus 49% provincially achieving at or above the acceptable level). It is, however, misleading to look at this comparison without understanding the background characteristics of the ESL participants. Even ESL students themselves are *not* a homogeneous group. Their English proficiency levels vary considerably depending on a host of other variables such as "age, length of time in English-speaking Canada, previous educational experience, and exposure to English prior to arrival in Canada" (ERGO). For instance, ESL students from countries or regions like Hong Kong where English is part of the school curriculum would likely have more advantages in the language than those students originating in countries like Vietnam and China where formal exposure to English is minimal.

This point is particularly relevant for school boards, like Toronto. In Toronto, not only has the number of ESL students been growing year by year, but the city also tends to have a high concentration of ESL students who are recent arrivals from countries where they have little prior exposure to the English language and/or where their schooling has often been interrupted. (See Figure 5.) It would be unrealistic to expect many of these students to write in English at the level of native speakers.

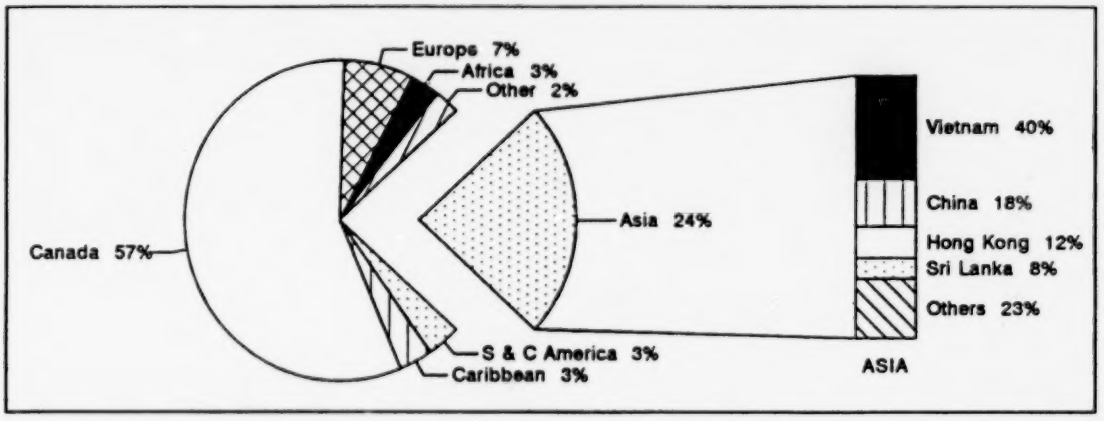

Figure 5: Countries of origin of Toronto's secondary school students, 1991-92[5]

While the Provincial Review Student Questionnaire did not have items on any of these variables, there was a question that may relate indirectly to one of the factors - the length of time in Canada. The question was: "... in which grade were you last enrolled in an ESL program?" One may assume that students who answered "elementary school" were those who had been in Canada for a longer period of time than those who answered "Grade 11" or "Grade 12". A cross-tabulation of ESL students' response to this question and their writing results clearly indicates that those who had been in the school system longer were more likely to write at or above the acceptable level than the recent arrivals. (See Figure 6.)

5. Source: The 1991 Every Secondary Student Survey: Initial Findings. Toronto Board of Education, Research Services (Report #200), p.4.

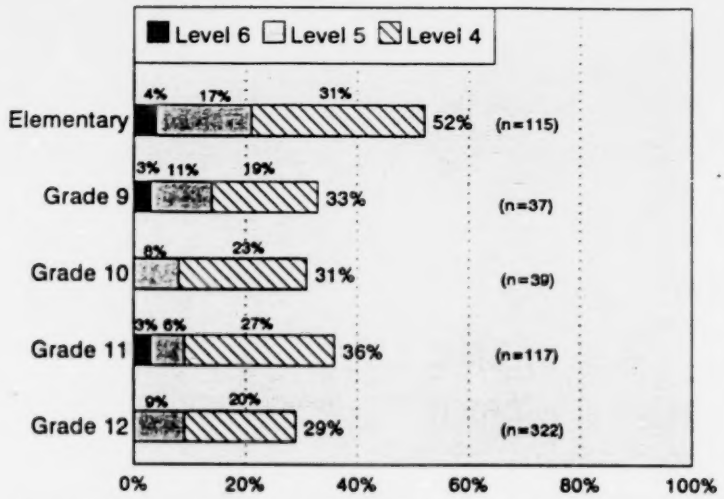

Figure 6: ESL students' writing results and their last grade of ESL enrolment

Nonetheless, over a third (35%) of the self-identified ESL students (see Figure 4), of whom many had been recently enrolled in ESL programs, were able to perform at or above the acceptable level. Yet, one should realize that:

> Most ESL learners will achieve much lower results than their English speaking peers, when evaluated on English skills that they have had less opportunity to learn. These learners may have the same English literacy outcomes as targets, but require a different set of timelines for reaching them, depending on their present stage of second language acquisition. (ERGO)

It is important to understand the nature and the background of the ESL students so that educators can identify their specific needs and plan appropriate strategies, resources and timelines. Unfortunately, the 1991-92 Writing Review did not collect data on ESL students' background to render this analysis possible. Yet a further breakdown of students' responses to the Provincial Review survey based on the question of students' ESL enrolment yields some interesting and useful information about our ESL students:

- ESL students had a slightly lower percentage (10%) than non-ESL students (17%) who reported that they enjoyed writing, but an approximately equal proportion of both groups (68% ESL and 64% non-ESL) reported they enjoyed writing some of the time, depending on what they were writing.

- In terms of degree of confidence as a writer, a much higher percentage of non-ESL than ESL (21% versus 7%) were "very confident", yet about the same percentage of both non-ESL and ESL said they were "somewhat confident" (68% non-ESL and 70% ESL).

- Interestingly, ESL students spent much more time per week on English homework which involved writing than non-ESL students - 45% of ESL versus 20% of non-ESL spent four or more hours on English homework.

- More ESL students than non-ESL (61% versus 38%) always/often preferred to work in class . This finding is confirmed by the question about the extent class environment is good for writing - 27% of ESL found it to a *great* extent versus 15% of non-ESL.

- ESL students also seemed more likely than non-ESL students to rely on their teachers as an important source of support for improving their writing; but the reverse pattern is true in terms of parents' or guardians' support:

  - 82% of ESL students versus 70% of non-ESL thought teachers were an important source of encouragement to achieve in school; the case is reversed with regard to the importance of parents or guardians - 72% ESL versus 82% non-ESL.

  - 36% ESL students versus 23% non-ESL tended to discuss their writing piece frequently with their teachers; conversely, 17% ESL versus 25% non-ESL discussed with their family or friends frequently.

  - 71% ESL versus 53% of non-ESL found their teachers *very* helpful in discussions of their writing; on the other hand, 17% ESL versus 26% non-ESL found family members of friends *very* helpful in this respect.

- ESL students were more likely than non-ESL students to find the following resources helpful:

	ESL	Non-ESL
- Reference books	95%	86%
- Teacher comments on written work in progress	94%	86%
- Individual conferences with my teacher on my work in progress	87%	76%
- Specific teacher instruction in grammar	87%	66%
- Formal whole-class lessons on aspects of writing	81%	68%
- Individual assignments on aspects of writing	81%	66%
- Language or grammar handbooks	73%	40%
- Small-group assignments on aspects of writing	69%	56%

- Both ESL and non-ESL generally agreed with the helpfulness of many evaluation practices. But in two particular evaluation methods, more ESL students than non-ESL found them helpful. They were:

	ESL	Non-ESL
- Conferences with my teacher on the quality of my finished work	84%	70%
- Being able to re-write a paper after it is marked by my teacher	74%	63%

Other related variables and writing outcomes

A further probing of the raw data indicates that the Toronto students' writing results were also related to such factors as gender, hours of part-time work, and the level of difficulty of previous English courses taken.

- Gender: A higher percentage of female students (57%) who were enrolled in the Grade 12 Advanced Level English courses achieved at or above the acceptable level than their male counterparts (48%). The percentage who reported "I enjoy writing" or "I enjoyed writing some of the time" was also higher among female students than male students (85% versus 76%). Interestingly, a slightly higher proportion of male students (87%) than female students (83%) indicated that they were either very or somewhat confident as a writer. (See Figure 7.)

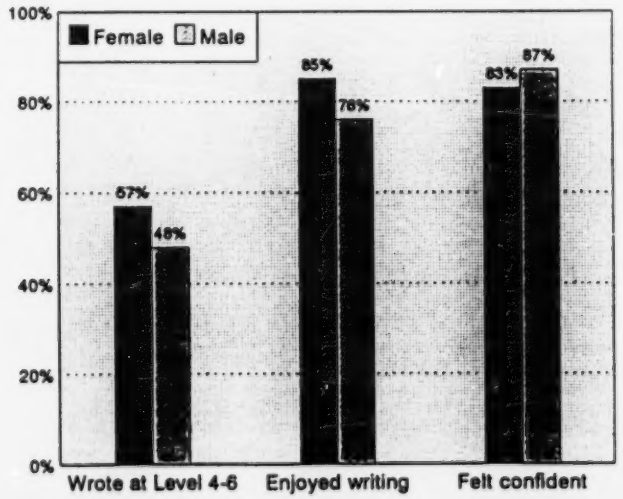

Figure 7: Gender differences in writing results, attitude and confidence

o Hours of part-time work: Those who spent more time on part-time work were less likely to achieve well in their writing than those who worked fewer hours; but those who did not work at all did not outperform those who worked limited hours. (See Figure 8.) This pattern indeed corroborates the finding in the recent Every Secondary School Student Survey, Part III (Toronto Board Research Report # 205).

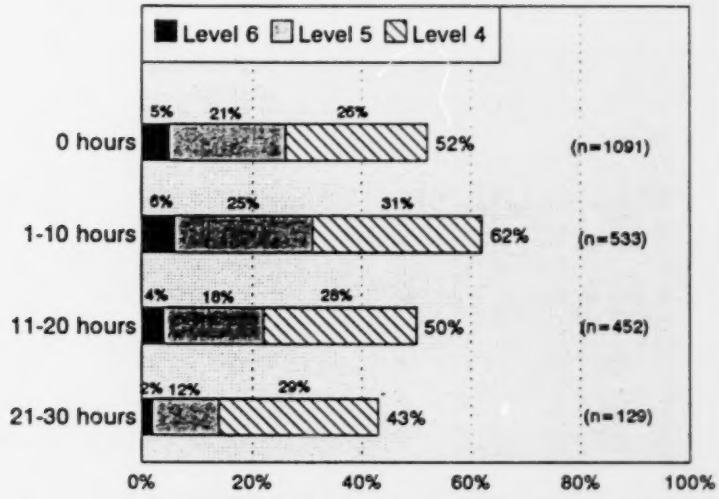

Figure 8: Part-time work and writing results

o Level of difficulty of previous English courses taken: Students who always took Advanced Level English courses in their secondary school years were much more likely to write at or above the acceptable level than those who had switched to/from General Level English course(s) previously (58% versus 36%). (See Figure 9.)

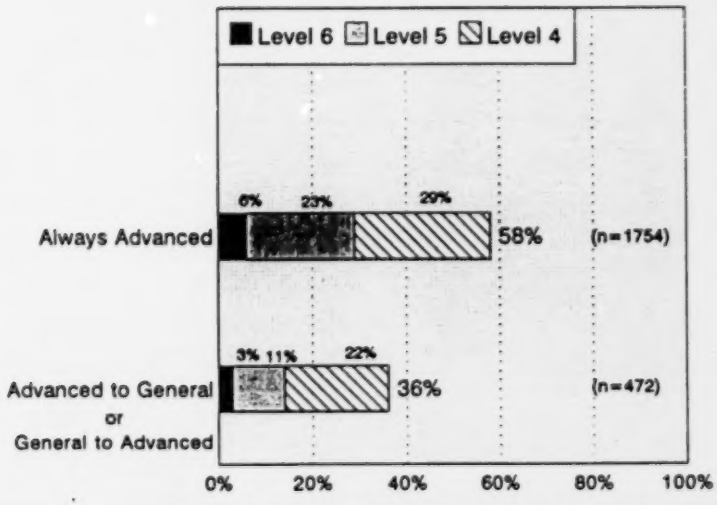

Figure 9: Previous English courses and writing results

School and staff: What was desired and what has been done

In addition to understanding students' performance and needs, it is important to see how schools and teachers in general have been doing in their writing programs. A synthesis and comparison of all the questionnaire results from all groups of participants (principal, department heads, teachers, and students) reveals a few gaps between what was intended and what has actually been implemented in schools in four specific areas:

- Writing across the curriculum;
- Teaching of writing;
- Evaluation of writing;
- Use of computers in writing.

Writing across the curriculum

Almost all (92%) of the principals/department heads indicated that their school or board "has an active policy on writing across the curriculum or language across the curriculum". However, only a few (16%) schools reported having their "teachers from all subjects ... meet more than twice a year to discuss the teaching and evaluation of writing.". Also, only about a quarter of principals/department heads said that the Board or the school as a whole had a policy or a set of common criteria for evaluating Grade 12 student writing, although over three quarters (77%) indicated that such policy or common criteria did exist within the English department of their schools.

Teaching of writing

Over half (57%) of the teachers reported having "professional development in the *teaching of writing* during the past five years," mainly through conferences, workshops, and Board or school in-service. But there were still 44% of the teachers who said that they had little or no professional development in this area for the past five years.

A large majority of *both* teachers and students agreed with the importance of various kinds of writing in their English course - the top three were: exposition, answers to assigned questions (tests, homework), and personal writing. It should, however, be noted that aside from these

three types of writing, some Advanced Level students also indicated that they *liked* narrative writing (stories and plays) (50%), poetry and song (33%), and writing for media (29%).

Furthermore, it was found that the teaching methods that were always or often used by the teachers were more or less the ones that the students found very/ helpful in improving their writing. These included:

	Students	Teachers
- Teacher comments on written work	88%	98%
- Reference books	88%	80%
- Individual teacher-student conferences	79%	70%
- Models of good professional writing	66%	77%

There were, however, three teaching strategies mentioned in the questionnaires that the students found very/helpful but were not often/always used by most of their teachers. They were:

	Students	Teachers
- Specific teacher instruction in grammar	72%	51%
- Formal whole-class lessons on aspects of writing	71%	34%
- Individual assignments on aspects of students' writing	70%	42%

Evaluation of writing

Over half of the teachers (55%) indicated that they had "little or no professional development in the *evaluation of writing* during the past five years", whereas a third (36%) of the teachers thought that the "lack of training in the evaluation of writing as a process" was a concern in their evaluation of student writing. According to most teachers, their major concern was time:

- Time available for evaluating the writing students generate (92%); and
- The time required to teach and evaluate the other components of the English course (89%).

About half of the principals/department heads pointed out that "teachers of grade 12 English never [met] for the collaborative assessment of writing done by students" on an examination (48%) or in their writing folders (56%).

Teachers (72%) and students (67%) agreed that written comments by the teacher on the quality of students' finished work was a *very* helpful evaluation strategy. However, students were more likely than teachers to find the following two evaluation practices *very* helpful.

	Students	Teachers
- Separate marks for each aspect of the writing	52%	28%
- Numerical and letter marks	38%	18%

Use of computers in writing

About three quarters (71%) of the teachers believed that computers were helpful in improving student writing. About the same proportion (75%) also believed that computers could make students more enthusiastic about writing. Nevertheless, the majority of the teachers (80%) reported "little or no professional development in the use of computers in the English classroom." Furthermore, about two-thirds (65%) admitted that they were beginners or unable to use computers. And 41% of the teachers found it "very difficult" or "not possible" to arrange for students to use computers in school for writing in the English class.

As far as students were concerned, less than half (47%) described themselves as "expert" or "comfortable users" of computers, and about the same proportion (46%) reported that they had used a computer for the writing for their English course. Interestingly, for those who used the computer, they mainly used it at home (86%), and only half of this proportion (43%) reported using it in school.

Conclusion

Direct comparisons of the Board writing results with those of other school boards or even the province as a whole are misleading without considering the composition of the students participating in the Review. This is particularly so in such school boards as Toronto where the proportion of ESL students is significantly higher than that of other jurisdictions. A breakdown of the overall results by students' response to the ESL enrolment question, which may be a more useful way of presenting the data, indicates that the performance of non-ESL students was somewhat parallel to that of the province.

The breakdown does, however, reveal that Toronto's ESL students lagged behind the provincial results for ESL students. One possible reason for the gap is the different

background of Toronto's ESL students from those of other jurisdictions, as the proficiency level of ESL students is likely to be related to such factors as age, recency of arrival in Canada, prior exposure to the English language, and previous schooling experiences. Unfortunately, the 1991-92 Review did not have information on ESL students' background to allow analyses of such relationships. It is hoped that the Ministry will consider the collection of these data in their future language reviews in order to provide educators a better insight into the actual performance and needs of different groups of ESL students. In any event, the Toronto Board 1991-92 Every Secondary School Student Survey does indicate a large proportion of Toronto's foreign-born students coming from background with very limited prior exposure to the English language. This is an essential element to bear in mind when comparing the ESL writing results of one board with those of the others.

Not only is it important to interpret or compare results within some contextual framework, but such an analysis would allow policymakers to identify groups that require closer attention, and to understand their special needs. For instance, it was found that male students, those who spent over 10 hours on part-time work, and those who had taken General or Basic Level English courses were the ones who might require greater support from the school in improving their writing. Furthermore, a comparison of ESL students' responses to those of non-ESL shows that the former were in greater need of their school, especially their teachers, as an important source of support for developing their English writing skills.

With regard to program implementation, the findings point out that more could be done in the areas of writing across the curriculum, and the use of computers in writing. In terms of teaching and evalution of writing, both students and teachers seem to agree on the helpfulness and importance of many methods and practices used in the classroom. But there were a few areas which students found helpful and would probably like to see more of those from their teachers. These included: teaching aspects of writing; instruction in grammar; having separate marks for each aspect of the writing; and having numerical and letter marks for their writing.

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